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ABSTRACT

A teacher of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to adults in a non-English-speaking country describes use of classroom writing conferences to improve student language use and introduce writing into the communicative syllabus. The approach is based on a conference format and focuses on self-directed inquiry. Students are provided with monolingual dictionaries and thesauri, a writing journal, and some reference works. Two basic formats were adopted: peer (student-student) and teacher-student conferences, with participants in pairs or small groups. Each conference focuses on one of three areas: content (while work is in process); process and style; or assessment of skill, form, vocabulary, structure, coherence. In each conference, four things happen: the writer reads his piece aloud; listeners respond by asking questions or commending good technique; the writer explains his perspective and asks for audience clarification of comments, focusing on content, process, or evaluation; and discussion turns to what the writer will do next with the piece. These steps are designed to build audience awareness and related writing processes. It is recommended that this be scheduled as an open-ended exercise. Students' favorite works are compiled at course conclusion. (MSE)

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Writing Conferences and Some Applications for the EFL Classroom

By Christopher Renner

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WRITING CONFERENCES AND SOME APPLICATIONS FOR THE EFL CLASSROOM.

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Over the past three years I have struggled to accomplish two objectives: 1) to stop producing fluently incorrect students, and 2) to introduce writing into a "communicative" syllabus.

While my students are able to communicate orally and have good strategies for listening, I've found repeatedly that they make syntax errors. These errors might not impede communication, but they certainly do not help win scholarships to American Universities.

Introducing writing, other than the occasional post card, course form, or customs declaration, has proven equally troublesome but for different reasons (I will be speaking of L1 italian students in this article.) Firstly, I found most students don't write creatively in L1 and carry this into their L2. Secondly in my 2 study groups totalling 35 students, the majority approached writing in L2 with all the fears and frustrations they felt in their L1 plus the added weight of a limited L2 vocabulary. In addition to these learning blocks, I altered the role of "teacher" by relinquishing my power of authority and giving the power to the students. Their insecurity with the unusual role model brought mixed reactions at first.

In the EFL situation, writing is usually last when people write course books. There are "functional" writing pieces using the language, functions and structures presented in a particular unit, the before-mentioned post card, which at the beginning levels is feasible. On the other hand, when you are dealing with students who are preparing for the TOEFL, GRE or Michigan exams this limited writing ability is not satisfactory. Students do have "advanced" oral skills but their ability to write has remained at the post card level of their first course because the writing skill has not been integrated into their L2 learning process.

Confronting this problem I went to American ESL resources. Many were not compatible with the EFL classroom because of their heavy reliance on a native English-speaking environment. However, after evaluation, trial and error, and a good deal of student reorientation to the roles being used, I believe I have developed an on-going approach to writing which I find enabling to the students and liberating for those who have to "grade" compositions and other writing pieces.

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THE ENVIRONMENT

Writing teaches English thought patterns. It eliminates syntax errors, increases vocabulary awareness and removes Italianisms. That is, if writing is taught correctly or if writing is taught at all.

After several attempts I have found that the best environment in which writing and learning

occur is in an atmosphere of a conference.

Writing is always in process. Therefore, if we look at our classrooms as a center in which each student will be at a different point in completing a project, writing takes on new meaning. The role of the instructor - not teacher - is probably more demanding as teaching changes from a direct to an indirect approach, thus demanding that the instructor be in tune with the teachable moments on an individual basis.

The students need to have certain "tools" available for their use. These include: monolingual dictionaries, thesauruses, a "writing journal", and some reference books which offer the students help in organizing their ideas. The "writing journal" should be where the students do their work, containing all of their writing from the first steps of organizing ideas to the final draft In the end, it should offer the students a detailed recounting of their writing development process.

THE WRITING CONFERENCES

Before discussing how the writing conference works in the EFL classroom it is important to cover some of the philosophy used in its implementation.

As I stated earlier I have used mainly American ESL materials in preparing my writing syllabus. Aside from the obvious reasons of teaching American English and being American, I went to these sources primarily because of a point of view regarding education I believe in. Language acquisition comes through personal investment, risk and involvement. For students to actively acquire L2 there must be a motivating need. In addition, my students' ages range from 16 to 66 with the majority falling between 20 and 35. Therefore they are adult learners who need more than coursebooks and routine to learn.

"An adult learning experience should be a process of self-directed inquiry, with resources of the teachers, fellow students, and materials being available to the learners but not imposed on them. The learners should be active participants, discovering those things they are ready to discover..."[1] Taking this particular point of view into consideration, the conference structure offers the student the resources, support and motivation to discover language through self-discovery.

At the beginning many of my students resisted this strange structure which is quite foreign to their experience of education. They expected to be corrected which I find does very little good in correcting incorrect language. My imposing a correct structure will not erase the incorrect structure in the student's mind. Unlearning is the key to learning and this also includes what the student has been taught to expect as a learning environment. I overcame this block by organizing some in-class discussions of different types of educational philosophy, comparing education in the US, England and Italy, and discussing the topic: My best Teachers. In this last topic the students had to analyse why the teacher had been especially effective in teaching them.

I personally had to prepare myself for these writing conferences as participant as well as facilitator in order to understand the students' fears and help them overcome the blocks to

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active learning. This meant I had to first organize, prepare and write. I think the most demanding problem was organising my time so that I could write on a regular basis. I also shared what I had written with the class, often using it to point out how writing can be improved by the feedback given in the conference. A level of confidentiality is required within the class. Writing is often personal and the information revealed in the conferences must remain within the confines of the classroom. I found my sharing with the students stimulated this process and teachers should be aware of this in deciding if the structure is adaptable for younger learners who have not developed an awareness of respect for privacy.

THE CONFERENCES: STRUCTURES

I have used two basic conference structures: Peer Conferences (student-student) and Teacher-Student. Peer Conferences imply pair and small group work whereas the Teacher-Student conferences are evaluative of the total learning process. These two basic models have three organizational forms:

1. *Content Conference*: Focuses only on content while the work is in process. It assists the writer to evaluate what is being written and if clarity and unity are being accomplished in the piece. The conference participants give feedback to the writer as to what they have understood from the piece. The writer then evaluates his/her piece reflecting on the feedback received.

2. *Process Conference*: Focuses only on how the piece was written. Why the author chose to present the topic in the manner she/he did. A critical evaluation of "writing style" is important in this conference. This implies that the writer has been exposed to "style". I have done this via various reading texts that offer the students the opportunity to interact with what they are reading: to evaluate the style being used and how the text would change if another style had been used to convey the same information.

3. *Evaluation Conference*: Looking at the development of writing ability, form, vocabulary, structure. The group, after listening to the piece, questions the piece's ability to stand up to what they have learned about writing. Are the main ideas supported? Do the words, in the order they are written, achieve the author's stated intentions? Is the piece concise and coherent?

In each of these conferences four things should happen. The writer begins by reading aloud her/his piece to the conference group. The reading should be uninterrupted; clarification follows after the reading when the conference peers respond to the reading by asking questions about points they did not understand, or by pointing out parts which they thought were especially well-written. Next, the conference focuses on Content, Process, or Evaluation in which the writer explains the writing piece for her/his point of view or asks the listeners clarification questions. Finally, the focus shifts to what the writer is going to do next with the piece. These steps build a sense of audience or readership for the writer, who increases her/his awareness of

style, form and content from a critical point of view. (See appendices.)

I find the conference structure especially helpful in the EFL classroom as it imagines the students in active use of all four skills. The communication is by and large authentic in that the students must think in L2 during the process and be able to respond to unprepared questioning.

Time considerations are important when planning for a conference. Some writing techniques need to be timed but with a conference the structure must be open-ended so that the individual groups can run their own course. I participate for the first 15 minutes or so in one group, being an active listener, then move around the room checking on the other groups to be sure that they remain focused. By this I mean that the group is working well and that no one person is monopolizing the time. To be effective, the groups must keep moving and the students must keep to the nature of the conference, not particular points of view regarding the content.

Finally, at the end of the course, I ask the students to choose the writing piece that they feel is their best or which they want "published." I then collect these and photocopy the "book" for the students in the course. The students enjoy this publication and the possibility to read their work "in print".

CONCLUSIONS:

After my original time of experimentation I have used the Conference procedure for the last two academic years with a total of 15 different classes, mainly intermediate and up. The results have been extremely successful. Students who would struggle to produce a poorly organized, one-page composition were producing well-organized, interesting and readable four-to-six page compositions at the end of the course. Many students stated that the experience had helped them to write in L1 as well. I had not intended this result but was very pleased that the students carried something from their L2 into their L1.

I also observed that higher level students were able to take in newly presented structures and more complicated grammatical points, use them actively and correctly, with a new ease that had been lacking in past advanced level classes. At lower levels, students were able to produce longer writing pieces using linkers and contrasters presented in the communicative textbooks: surpassing the functional writing tasks presented and encouraging use of monolingual dictionaries to assist their vocabulary acquisition.

The biggest change was in the actual carrying out of the course objectives. My class programming developed not so much on the content of the book to be covered, but how that information could be included in the writing process and thus passively learned through homestudy and actively applied in the conference situation. This point proved to be encouraging in the developing of independent, self-motivated students who could learn on their own and produce the language in all four skills.

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PEER CONFERENCES

(Content or Process Conferences)

Each writer in the group will have a chance to reach his/her piece of writing. Spend about ten to fifteen minutes working with each writer.

Follow the following steps

1. Listen to the story. LISTEN!

2. Tell what you heard and understood to the writer. Just repeat the story. Begin by saying, "Your piece is about..." or, "You are writing about...", etc.

3. Tell the writer what you think the main idea of the piece is.

4. Now, if you don't understand something, ask the writer for details.

5. Ask the writer: Are you satisfied with your piece?

   a) Would you like to continue working on it?

   b) How will you continue?

   c) Is there anything you forgot to say in your piece?

   d) Do you like writing about this subject?

6. Criticism: You may tell the writer why you liked the piece, what was interesting, or not interesting.

Don't think about correcting grammar. Concentrate on the subject, the story, the ideas.

(Adapted from an original by Maxine Steinhaus.)